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ABSTRACT

The National Language Policy is a response to efforts to make English the "official" language of the United States. In 1981, Senator S.I. Hayakawa sponsored a constitutional amendment to make English the official language of the United States, and ever since then, variations on his proposal have been before Congress. This position paper of the members of the Conference on College Composition and Communication contends that "English Only" is unnecessary, unrealistic, educationally unsound, unfair and dangerous, invasive, counterproductive, and unconstitutional. The paper outlines a language policy with three inseparable parts: (1) to provide resources to enable native and nonnative speakers to achieve oral and literate competence in English, the language of wider communication; (2) to support programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in an individual's mother tongue will not be lost; and (3) to foster the teaching of languages other than English so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language. The paper notes that many professional organizations oppose "English Only." Contains 8 references. (NKA)

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The National Language Policy

Conference on College Composition and Communication

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The National Language Policy

Conference on College Composition and Communication

BACKGROUND

The National Language Policy is a response to efforts to make English the "official" language of the United States. This policy recognizes the historical reality that, even though English has become the language of wider communication, we are a multilingual society. All people in a democratic society have the right to education, to employment, to social services, and to equal protection under the law. No one should be denied these or any civil rights because of linguistic differences. This policy would enable everyone to participate in the life of this multicultural nation by ensuring continued respect both for English, our common language, and for the many other languages that contribute to our rich cultural heritage.

CCCC NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY

Be it resolved that CCCC members promote the National Language Policy adopted at the Executive Committee meeting on March 16, 1988. This policy has three inseparable parts:

1. To provide resources to enable native and nonnative speakers to achieve oral and literate competence in English, the language of wider communication.

2. To support programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in one's mother tongue will not be lost.

3. To foster the teaching of languages other than English so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language.

Passed unanimously by both the Executive Committee and the membership at the CCCC Annual Meeting in March 1988, the National Language Policy is now the official policy of the CCCC.

What raised the need for the Language Policy?

The English Only movement, which began in 1981 when Senator S. I. Hayakawa sponsored a constitutional amendment to make English the official language of the United States. Variations on his proposal have been before Congress ever since; there were five proposals in 1988 and three in 1990. The Language of Government Act has been pending before the House and Senate since 1991.

In 1983 an organization called "U.S. English" was founded by Senator Hayakawa and Dr. John Tanton, an ophthalmologist. That organization promotes English Only legislation, both in Congress and state legislatures. By June 1992, sixteen states had declared English the official language.

Some states, however, have taken stands against language protectionism. In 1989, New Mexico, Washington, and Oregon passed "English Plus" laws that protect the use of languages other than English and encourage the study of foreign languages. Both Hawaii and Louisiana have official policies aimed at preserving languages and cultures.

In February 1990, a federal district judge in Arizona ruled that the state's constitutional amendment making English the official language violated the First Amendment's protection of free speech.

What's wrong with English Only?

It's unnecessary. English, the global lingua franca and the language of wider communication in this country, is not threatened. For two centuries, most immigrants learned English within a generation without any laws compelling them. Current immigrants are doing the same.

It's unrealistic. Thousands of people are on waiting lists to enroll in English classes. Laws making English the official language do nothing to increase the number of such classes, nor do they teach a single person English.

It's educationally unsound. English Only opposes bilingual and similar programs that help students build on their linguistic skills. When students cannot use their strengths, they experience alienation and failure. Prohibiting or discouraging diversity limits rather than expands learning opportunities.

It's unfair and dangerous. When we pass laws that forbid health and safety information, street signs, court trials, and marriage ceremonies in languages people can understand, we deny them legal protection and social services.

It's invasive. English Only laws violate the privacy of speakers of other languages. When Filipino hospital employees are told they cannot speak Tagalog in the lounge, or when a college employee is told he must not speak Spanish during lunch break, they are denied free expression.

It's counterproductive. As members of the global community, we need speakers of different languages. It's shortsighted, anti-immigrant, and racist to demean and destroy the competencies of bilingual people.

It's unconstitutional. The First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech. The Fourteenth Amendment forbids abridging the privileges and immunities of naturalized citizens. English Only laws violate these constitutional rights.

Who else opposes English Only?

The English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC) was born in the fall of 1987. Housed at the headquarters of the Joint National Council on Languages in Washington, D.C., EPIC serves as a national repository for information helpful to the increasing number of scholarly, ethnic, and civil liberty organizations that oppose English Only legislation. EPIC Events, a bimonthly newsletter, keeps subscribers informed. According to EPIC's Statement of Purpose, the English Plus concept "holds that the national interest can best be served when all persons of our society have access to effective opportunities to acquire strong English proficiency plus mastery of a second or multiple languages."

More than forty civic, religious, and professional organizations have passed resolutions opposing the English Only movement and supporting English Plus. Supporters include NCTE, NEA, TESOL, MLA, American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages, the Center for Applied Linguistics, the American Psychological Association, the National Council for Black Studies, and the National Council of Churches of Christ. Both NCTE and NEA have published books that explain their positions on English Only legislation and that provide background material necessary to guard against language restrictionism (see Selected Titles). For more information, contact EPIC, 220 I Street, NE, Suite 220, Washington, DC 20002.

SUPPORT THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY: WHAT YOU CAN DO

Strive to include all citizens of all language communities in the positive development of our daily activities.

Provide education, social services, legal services, medical services, and protective signing for linguistic minorities in their own languages so that basic human rights are preserved.

Emphasize the importance of learning second and third languages by all Americans so that we can:

participate more effectively in worldwide activities

unify diverse American communities

enlarge our view of what is human

Recognize that those who do not speak English need time and encouragement to learn, but that their ability to prosper over the long term requires facility in the dominant American language.

Encourage immigrants to retain their first languages, to pass them on to their children, and to celebrate the life-supporting customs of their parents in the company of other Americans of differing backgrounds.

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